OEDIPUS REX
Sophocles

Year Written: 430 B.C.E
Setting: Thebes (Greece)
Genre: Greek Tragedy

Name: ____________________________

English 9 Regents
Words/Terms to Know

**Catharsis:** Purging/cleansing of emotions

**Dramatic Irony:** The dramatic effect achieved when an audience perceives something that a character in the literature does not know. (The audience is more aware than the characters in the work.) Often contributes to conflict and suspense in the work.

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**Fate:** The supposed force, principle, or power that predetermines events.

**Hamartia** [hah-mahr-tee-uh]: A mistake; misjudgment

**Hubris:** Excessive pride; arrogance

**Incest:** Crime of sex between related persons

**Monologue:** A long, uninterrupted speech (in a narrative or drama) that is spoken in the presence of other characters. Unlike a soliloquy and an aside, a monologue is heard by other characters.

**Motif:** is any recurring element that has symbolic significance in a story. Through its repetition, a motif can help produce other narrative (or literary) aspects such as theme or mood.

**Oracle:** A person, such as a priestess, through whom a deity (god/goddess) is held to respond when consulted.

**Parricide:** killing one’s father/parent

**Prophecy:** Prediction

**Prophet:** A person who speaks by divine inspiration or as the interpreter through whom the will of a god is expressed.

**Additional Words/Terms:**
Aristotle’s *Poetics*
- circa 335 BCE
- considered the first systematic critical theory in the world
- for nearly 2,000 years it has inspired the thoughts of writers, philosophers and critics
- *Poetics* was not widely influential during its time, but during the Age of Enlightenment, Aristotle's views shaped the concept of tragedy.
Elements of Greek Tragedy

A *tragedy* is a serious play that usually moves from harmony to discord with a sad or disastrous ending. The protagonist (tragic hero) is brought to ruin or suffers extreme sorrow, especially as a consequence of a tragic flaw, a moral weakness, or an inability to cope with unfavorable circumstances. (Recounts an individual’s - the tragic hero’s - death or downfall, beginning high and ending low.)

- Tragedy received its name from how it was performed. “Tragedy” is derived from the word *tragos* which means “goat.” A tragedy had actors who wore goatskins and danced like goats. The best performers were given a kid goat as a prize. Subjects of Greek plays included: violence, social and ethical issues, family, war, murder, lust, and betrayal.

Element #1: Plot (*mythos*)

The plot is how the action is arranged (unity of action/cause and effect) – Each of the incidents in the play is a part of a tightly constructed cause-and-effect chain. The ideal Greek play should have a complex plot involving a change in fortune for the main character. Reversals, recognitions, and suffering are common features.

1. **Exposition** consists of early material introducing the theme(s), establishing the setting, and introducing the major characters and sometimes early hints of the coming conflict.
   - ***Incentive Moment*** – The beginning; must start the cause and effect chain.
2. **Rising Action** is an increase in tension or uncertainty developed out of the conflict the protagonist faces. The incentive moment to the climax is called the *desis*.
3. Traditionally situated in the third act of a play, the *climax* is the moment of greatest tension, uncertainty, or audience involvement. The climax is also called the crisis.
4. During the *falling action*, the earlier tragic force causes the failing fortunes of the hero. This culminates in the final catastrophe and invokes catharsis (emotional purgation) in the audience.
5. The **Denouement** is the resolution. After the suspense ends, the denouement unwinds previous tension and helps provide closure.

***According to Aristotle, the plot may be either simple or complex, although complex is better. Simple plots have only a “change of fortune” (catastrophe). Complex plots have both “reversal of intention” (peripeteia) and “recognition” (anagnorisis) connected with the catastrophe. Both peripeteia and anagnorisis turn upon surprise. Aristotle explains that a peripeteia occurs when a character produces an effect opposite to that which he intended to produce, while an anagnorisis “is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined for good or bad fortune.” He argues the best plots combine these to as part of their cause-and-effect chain (i.e., the peripeteia leads directly to the anagnorisis); this in turn creates the catastrophe, leading to the final “scene of suffering.” (Source: [http://www2.cnr.edu/home/bmcmanus/poetics.html](http://www2.cnr.edu/home/bmcmanus/poetics.html))

**Peripeteia** [per-uh-pi-tahy-uh, -tee-uh] – (Greek for "sudden change") The sudden *reversal of fortune* in a story, play, or any narrative in which there is an observable change in direction. In tragedy, this is often a change from stability and happiness toward the destruction or downfall of the protagonist.
Anagnorisis [an-ag-nawr-uh-sis, -nohr-] – The moment of tragic recognition in which the protagonist realizes some important fact or insight, especially a truth about himself, human nature, or his situation. Aristotle argues that the ideal moment for anagnorisis in a tragedy is the moment of peripeteia, the reversal of fortune. Critics often claim that the moment of tragic recognition is found within a single line of text, in which the tragic hero admits to his lack of insight or asserts the new truth he recognizes. This passage is often called the "line of tragic recognition."

Catastrophe [kuh-tas-truh-fee] – The catastrophe often spirals outward. Not only does the hero suffer for an earlier choice, but that choice causes suffering to those the hero loves or wants to protect. In Greek tragedy, an ultimate suffering commonly placed before the resolution.

Element #2: Character (ethos)
The protagonist of a Greek tragedy is called the tragic hero. He is usually a person who holds a position of honor or high status (often of noble birth) that may have great influence in his or her society. The tragic hero is good person, but he is not perfect. Aristotle, a famous Greek philosopher, says that the tragic hero should have a flaw and/or make some mistake either through ignorance or from a conviction that some greater good will be served.

This “mistake” is called hamartia [hah-mahr-tee-uh]. The hero need not die at the end, but he/she must undergo a change in fortune. In addition, the tragic hero may achieve some revelation or recognition about human fate, destiny, and the will of the gods. Aristotle quite nicely terms this sort of recognition “a change from ignorance to awareness of a bond of love or hate.”

Element #3: Thought (Dianoia)
Thought reveals the theme (main idea/message) of a play. According to Aristotle, it is found “where something is proved to be or not to be, or a general maxim [truth, principle, or rule of conduct] is enunciated.”

Element #4: Diction (lexis)
The language of the play should be well-chosen to enhance the meaning and message of the work. According to Aristotle, diction is “the expression of the meaning in words” which are proper and appropriate to the plot, characters, and end of the tragedy.

- **Metaphor** - a figure of speech in which an implied comparison is made between two unlike things that actually have something important in common.

Element #5: Melody/Song (melos)
The songs and dancing of the chorus should be an integral part of the play. Aristotle argues that the Chorus should be fully integrated into the play like an actor; choral odes should not be “mere interludes,” but should contribute to the unity of the plot.

Element #6: Spectacle (opsis)
Although the visual presentation of the play was considered a key element, Aristotle viewed it as the “least artistic” element of tragedy. Think of a movie which is all visuals and action and very little plot, and you’ll understand what Aristotle means.
The Story of Oedipus:

Sophocles’ audience already knew the story of Oedipus long before the play. Therefore, Sophocles wrote the play with intentions of creating dramatic irony. The basic story behind Oedipus follows as such:

Before Oedipus was born, his father, King Laius, and his mother, Jocasta, received a prophecy from the oracle at Delphi. They were warned that their son would one day kill his father. Once their son was born, in order to avoid the fate told to them, King Laius and Jocasta tied the baby’s feet together and left him on a mountain to die. Oedipus was found by a shepherd, who passed him off to a messenger, who gave him to King Polybus of Corinth. Oedipus was raised believing King Polybus and his wife were his real parents; he was never told otherwise.

One day, Oedipus was told by a party guest that he was not actually the son of King Polybus. The King denied it, but an upset Oedipus went to the shrine at Delphi. He was told by Apollo that he would kill his father and marry his mother. He, too, like Laius, wanted to make it impossible for the oracle to come true; he resolved never to see Polybus again. He left his home, Corinth, to avoid killing whom he believed to be his father. In his lonely wanderings, he came to a place where three highways met. At this spot, Oedipus got into a fight with another group of men about who had the right of way on the road. Oedipus, in his rage, killed the men. Little did he know that one of the men he killed was his true father, Laius, thus fulfilling Apollo’s prophecy.

In his lonely wanderings he came into the country around Thebes and he heard what was happening there: A Sphinx, a monster with the body of a winged lion and the breasts and face of a woman, stood on a rock outside the gates and devoured everyone who failed to solve her riddle. Oedipus, then, became determined to seek the Sphinx out and try to solve it:

“What creature,” the Sphinx asked him, “goes on four feet in the morning, on two at noonday, on three in the evening?”

“Man,” answered Oedipus. “In childhood he creeps on hands and feet; in manhood he walks erect; in old age he helps himself with a staff.”

It was the right answer. The Sphinx then hurled herself to her death on the rocks below; the Thebans were saved. Oedipus gained all and more than he had left. The grateful citizens made him their king and he married the dead king’s wife, Jocasta (...his mother!). For many years they lived happily, and they had four children together.

Until Thebes was struck by a plague...

It is here that Oedipus Rex begins, thus the story starts in medias res (in the middle of things).
Guided Reading Questions

Directions: As you read the text, use the following questions to guide your note taking. Remember to always cite specific evidence from the text.

Prologue and Parodos: Due Date: ______________________________

1. What has been happening in Thebes that brings all members of the community to Oedipus’ palace for answers?

2. What deed had Oedipus accomplished that makes the people believe that he is “the man surest in mortal ways/And wisest in the ways of God”?

3. What do the people of Thebes want Oedipus to do for them?

4. Who is Creon?

5. Who does Oedipus send to Delphi to learn how to save Thebes?

6. What suggestion does Creon make when Oedipus asks about the message from the god, Apollo?

7. Who is Laios?

8. Why has no one made an attempt to find out the truth about what had happened to Laios?
9. To which three gods does the Chorus pray for help?

10. What does the Chorus want the gods to do for them?

Additional Notes:

Scene 1 and Ode 1: Due Date: ______________________________

1. What promise does Oedipus make to anyone who comes forward with information about Laios’s murder?

2. Why does Oedipus berate his people with regard to King Laios?

3. Who does the Choragos suggest could help Oedipus locate the whereabouts of the murderer?

4. When Oedipus asks the prophet to reveal the name of the murderer, what is the prophet’s response?

5. What conclusion does Oedipus jump to when the prophet continually refuses to give specific information about the events surrounding the death of King Laios?
6. Who does the prophet finally reveal as the murderer of King Laios?

7. Who is said to be most concerned with the fate of Laios’s murder?

8. Who does Oedipus accuse of being behind a plot to destroy him?

9. Who does the Chorus say will follow the killer wherever he goes?

10. What seems to be the attitude of the Chorus in Ode I toward the prophet’s revelation?

Additional Notes:

Scene 2 and Ode 2: Due Date: ______________________________

1. Why is Creon upset at the opening of scene 2?

2. What is Creon’s defense against the accusations against him?
3. Who does the Choragos claim can settle the dispute between Oedipus and Creon?

4. What convinces Oedipus to allow Creon to leave?

5. What “proof” does Iocaste offer that prophets do not tell the truth?

6. What is Oedipus’s reaction to hearing that Laios was killed in a place where three highways met?

7. What has become of the only surviving member of the attack on King Laios’s party?

8. Why had Oedipus fled Corinth many years before?

9. Who does Oedipus insist Iocaste send for?

10. According to Ode II, what can be said about the hearts of mortals?

Additional Notes:
Scene 3 and Ode 3: Due Date: ______________________________

1. To whom does Iocaste make an offering?

2. What news does the messenger from Corinth bring to Thebes?

3. How does Oedipus react to the Corinthian messenger’s news?

4. How did Polybos die?

5. Who does Oedipus claim to still fear in Corinth?

6. Specifically, what is Oedipus afraid of in Corinth?

7. What revelation does the messenger make to Oedipus?

8. How did Polybos come to raise Oedipus as his own son?

9. Who begs Oedipus to forget about finding the truth of his parentage?
10. Upon what mountain had the infant Oedipus been found?

Additional Notes:

Scene 4 and Ode 4: Due Date: ______________________________

1. Who identifies the old shepherd as the man who spared the infant Oedipus?

2. Where does the shepherd say he’d tended his sheep?

3. How did the shepherd and the messenger from Corinth know each other?

4. How does the shepherd react when the messenger states that King Oedipus was the baby the shepherd had given him?

5. How does Oedipus react to the shepherd’s reluctance to speak?

6. Who had originally given the infant to the shepherd?
7. Why had the infant been handed over to the shepherd to begin with?

8. Why didn’t the shepherd destroy the infant as instructed?

9. What truth does Oedipus learn?

10. Whose “great days [are] like ghosts gone”?

Additional Notes:

**Exodos: Due Date:** ______________________________
1. What news does the second messenger bring?

2. What did the messenger claim to have heard beyond the locked doors to the Queen’s apartment?

3. What took the messenger’s attention away from the din in the Queen’s room?

4. What happens to Iocaste?
5. What did Oedipus do after he held Iocaste in his arms?

6. What does Oedipus claim he will do now that the truth is known?

7. Who does Oedipus blame for his fate?

8. Who takes over as the ruler of Thebes?

9. Who has been sent for to say good-bye to Oedipus?

10. What finally becomes of Oedipus?

Additional Notes:
# GLOSSARY OF NAMES AND PLACES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cadmus</strong></td>
<td>founder of the city of Thebes</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Zeus</strong></td>
<td>supreme rule of the Olympian gods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Apollo</strong></td>
<td>god of the sun, poetry, music, and truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Delphi</strong></td>
<td>shrine of Apollo, considered the holiest place in ancient Greece, and the center of the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sphinx</strong></td>
<td>monster with the head and breasts of a woman and the body of a lion that terrorized Thebes with her deadly riddle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Delos</strong></td>
<td>island in the Aegean and birthplace of Apollo and Artemis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Artemis</strong></td>
<td>twin sister of Apollo, goddess of the moon and the hunt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Athena</strong></td>
<td>goddess of wisdom and battle, born in full armor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bacchus</strong></td>
<td>also called Dionysus; god of fertility, wine, and ecstatic joy. His followers were a group of frenzied women called the Bacchantes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parnassus</strong></td>
<td>mountain hovering above the shrine of Delphi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dorian</strong></td>
<td>meaning of noble birth and claiming descent from Dorus, one of the three sons of Helen, the traditional ancestor of all Greeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sybil</strong></td>
<td>divine prophetess of the oracle of Delphi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lysian Apollo</strong></td>
<td>both god of light and wolf-killer; from the Greek word “lykos” (wolf)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pythian</strong></td>
<td>meaning “of Delhi,” where Apollo killed the monstrous snake python</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cythaeron</strong></td>
<td>mountain on which Oedipus was left to die as an infant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Helicon</strong></td>
<td>sacred mountain in central Greece favored by the gods, goddesses, and the nine muses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pan</strong></td>
<td>god of shepherds and their flocks, with the body of a man and the horns and hooves of a goat. He made music by playing on pipes made of reeds</td>
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# CHARACTERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>King Polybus &amp; Queen Merope</td>
<td>Oedipus’ “parents;” King and Queen of Corinth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oedipus</td>
<td>King of Thebes. As a young man, he saved the city of Thebes by solving the riddle of the Sphinx, thus destroying the monster. He sets about finding the murderer of the former King Laius (not knowing he’s his real father) to save Thebes from plague.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jocasta</td>
<td>Queen of Thebes, wife of Oedipus. She was the widow of Thebes’ former king, Laius, and married Oedipus when he saved the city from the Sphinx. She is also Oedipus’ mother, although she does not know this when she marries him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creon</td>
<td>The second-in-command in Thebes, brother-in-law of Oedipus. He is Oedipus’ trusted advisor, selected to go to the oracle at Delphi to seek Apollo’s advice in saving the city from plague.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antigone</td>
<td>Oedipus’ daughter with Jocasta.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ismene</td>
<td>Oedipus’ daughter with Jocasta.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eteocles</td>
<td>Oedipus’ son with Jocasta.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polynices</td>
<td>Oedipus’ son with Jocasta.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiresias</td>
<td>A blind prophet who has guided the kings of Thebes with his advice and counsel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st Messenger</td>
<td>A man bringing news of the royal family to Oedipus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Herdsman</td>
<td>A shepherd from the nearby mountains, who once served in the house of Laius.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Messenger</td>
<td>A man who comes from the palace to announce the death of the queen and the blinding of Oedipus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>A group of Theban elders, and their Leader, who comment on the events of the drama and react to its tragic progression.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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